

414 THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

I never saw a man who looked
 With such a wistful
 eye
 Upon that little tent
 of blue
 Which prisoners call the sky,
 And at every wandering cloud that
 trailed
 Its ravelled fleeces by.
 He did not wring his hands, as do
 Those witless men who dare
 To try to rear the changeling Hope
 In the cave of black Despair:
 He only looked upon the sun,
 And drank the morning air.
 He did not wring his hands nor
 weep,
 Nor did he peek or pine,
 But he drank the air as
 though it held
 Some healthful anodyne;
 With open mouth he drank
 the sun
 As though it had been wine I
 And I and all the souls in pain,
 Who tramped the other ring[^]
 Forgot if we ourselves had done
 A great or little thing,
 And watched with gaze of dull amaze
 The man who had to swing.
 And strange it was to see him pass
 With a step so light and gay,
 And strange it was to see him look
 So wistfully at the day,
 And strange it was to think
 that he
 Had such a debt to pay.
 For oak and elm have pleasant leaves
 That in the spring-time shoot:
 But grim to see is the gallows-tree,
 With its adder-bitten root,
 And, green or dry, a man must die
 Before it bears its fruit!
 The loftiest place is that seat of
 grace
 For which all worldlings try:
 But who would stand in hempen band
 Upon a scaffold high,